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ABSTRACT

In this address some of the possible consequences of voucher plan adoption are considered. Areas of concern are (1) the degree of change from the present system, (2) the lack of incentive for new entrepreneurs to provide alternatives, (3) the effects on the concepts of the comprehensive school and heterogeneity, and (4) the changed roles of the public school district and the community citizen-client. The Educational Voucher Authority (EVA) is viewed as the agency to provide the answers to most of the objections. (MLF)

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The Customers Will Get You If You Don't Watch Out: A Hard Look at Some Implications of the Voucher Proposal

As you know, an educational voucher proposal suggests that for each school age child, parents would receive a voucher which allowed them to assign to whatever school they wished their child to attend an amount equal to the current per pupil cost of education. There has been some long standing interest in free market system in education which is based on the premise that open competition in the American tradition provides gains and developments, even for education, and that education is basically a concern of parents who can thus be expected to seek what is best for their children.

Recent interest in voucher proposals seems to have stemmed from two kinds of interest. Quite honestly some proponents started with a concern for the slow pace of innovation in the public schools and the heavy hand of bureaucracy. In seeking possible remedies the voucher idea came up as one which might put more focus on what programs and practices were actually being used and thus provide both more public attention to education and more alternatives from which to choose. The current concern for parochiaid, as such schools have experienced financial stress, has also created a climate favorable to consideration of voucher proposals. I think this is coincidence rather than that voucher proponents devised the plan to route public funds to private schools. Nonetheless the voucher plan represents such a possibility. A recent Saturday Review article did offer the voucher proposal as an answer to what was described as the joker in public support for private schools either directly or through contract for services. There was the assumption that with so much political pressure for parochiaid we must settle for some workable scheme.

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The careful consideration of the variety of voucher plan alternatives and the development of a model plan for experimentation carried out by Christopher Jencks and Walter McCann and distinguished associates with adequate funding has brought the matter of voucher proposals into focus. They have been careful not to advocate the voucher proposal but, rather, to advocate experimenting with it to see just how it would work in an actual community setting. I am assured that as they studied voucher system possibilities they had virtually all of the misgivings any of us might feel and that they looked at these with care as they drew up a model proposal.

Whereas they do not advocate the voucher plan but rather propose a try-out of it, the idea hits the most of us as an ultimate alternate arrangement for provisions and regulation of education. We have many questions about how it might work -- most of which could only be answered by try-out but we also have some concerns with respect for aspects that could not be determined on the basis of try-out. Thus we tend to resist even experimentation as a beginning of a change which seems threatening to key concepts of our present system of public education.

Let us take up some of the questions first. An initial question, of course, is that of how much change from our present system such an arrangement would actually make. What new schools would appear on the scene? What kinds of choices would parents make and on the basis of what information? Would there really be significant change or would we simply be adding a new layer or bureaucracy to a system pretty much like the present system? One scholar has estimated that not more than a sixth of the parents would make a decision on anything other than which school is nearest home. If only sixteen per cent would actually pass up the neighborhood school for some other basis of selection we are little better off percentage-wise than is present practice in enrollment

in non-public schools. Would this represent different parents making such choices or pretty much the same array of parents? If there is no significant shift would the voucher proposal be of enough importance to make the real differences the proponents hope to have come about? Would it be worth the new layer of governmental authority.

Of course no one knows what this percentage would really be. But to make any significant impact the voucher proposal is premised on a new and more abundant array of alternative choices in response to an active market. One must ask here what new entrepreneurs would be attracted by a voucher system based on the present expenditure level. The public schools have felt restricted by the present per pupil expenditure level in most communities. One special area of concern with or without a voucher system has been the problem of inner city schools and of those in the rural slums. Voucher proponents have indicated that the disadvantaged child would have some better chance under a voucher system but this is in large part because they would place a financial premium on educating the disadvantaged -- a way of working on this problem that is not uniquely tied to the voucher system. Just as there seems to be little tendency on the part of the best stores and most able professionals or others to move into the worn out inner city areas or to the rural slums it is hard to believe that there would be any great rush of new privately sponsored educational programs into such areas other than out of the same kinds of concerns which could be operative within the public school system.

A big element of the free market aspect of a voucher proposal loses out when different programs cannot be packaged and priced differently to offer a wide array to a diversified contingent of educational customers. (This, of course, is one aspect of the present system of non-public schools and the voucher plan

would not necessarily eliminate these options.) But if all voucher system participants must accept the voucher amount as full payment of tuition this is a great restriction on the market competition and on the variety exemplified in the American market of goods and services variously priced and differing in quality and attractiveness. Under such restrictions and limited to a voucher amount which seems perpetually inadequate, who would be attracted to provide the alternatives which proponents hope would evolve through operation of the voucher system? At one time there was some indication that American business management through reorganization and merger might develop marketable educational systems that would be as effective or more effective than traditional practices and which could be handled with reasonable cost. This prospect has not come along as rapidly as one might have hoped a few years ago. As development and promotion of such educational systems has slowed down one wonders if corporations are finding education to be more complex than originally assumed and if they are also finding that there are easier and more rewarding ways to make money while still serving other valid interests which they have.

The existing independent and parochial schools might come in on such a plan as survival policy -- carrying the extra costs out of endowment or voluntary contributions. In discussion of the voucher plan it has been assumed that this will be the case and suggestions have been made with respect to holding the voucher payment to cover secular education only and to provide adequate disclosure of funding, staffing, and educational practices as public safeguards. The desire and willingness to participate on the part of such established schools would depend on the degree of trade regulation by the proposed Educational Voucher Authority which reviews their finances and details of their programs and which seeks fairness and equity in the process of admitting students. But if they should see participation as important to survival this would not seem to

provide any additional or new alternatives to the present system. It might open the choice of attendance in such schools more widely.

Any new ventures responding to the voucher system would seem to be on the part of those who would be willing to put money behind vested interests of concern to them and for which they were willing to meet extra costs or on the part of those who felt they had some kind of gadgetry or system much more efficient in the use of dollars than is presently the case. Such ventures could be those espousing certain view-points to which they felt sufficiently committed. Or they might be programs highly specialized in nature, as described in some discussions of voucher proposals as one of the potential benefits. Certainly at this point in time it is not clear who would develop and provide the new alternatives in response to the availability of voucher income nor is there much more than an expressed hope that this will take place. In setting up a demonstration project preliminary study would no doubt seek some assurance that there would be some new educational ventures. However, such a condition as one basis for approving a demonstration project prevents any real testing of the degree to which a voucher system can attract new schools with new ideas. It seems rather to simply explore the extent to which we can live with this new arrangement for dispersing educational funds.

What does the voucher system mean with respect to the notion of the comprehensive school and to the idea of the value of heterogeneity? One answer might be that if it does not upset the public school system too severely this would be one of the real advantages to be offered by the public school. We may not have used to best advantage either the comprehensive school or the heterogeneity of school population but we have seen real advantages in these notions in comparison with the specialized schools of other cultures.

The public school concerned with the education of the total population and in terms of the best mutual interests of the individual and of society works toward a comprehensiveness and an array of resources to serve the whole array of human and societal needs. It has within it the potential of flexibility not present in a specialized school nor in a less inclusive school. The specialized schools responding to the voucher availability would seem more concerned with particular salable packages that would be marketable to a sufficient number of persons to make each operation a going concern. Private schools participating in the voucher plan serve at the option of the private interests in control. Public schools exist and serve as a matter of legal public obligation. The argument that we do not presently achieve the full benefit of heterogeneity nor the adaptability of a comprehensive school is no reason for discarding the possibility of working toward such a goal.

Quite wisely voucher proponents have assumed the need for a regulated market with some ground rules to be followed by all participants. A non-existent undeveloped Educational Voucher Authority is to be the protector and guarantor of fairness in the operation of the proposed system. As the able staff related to the Study project pondered specifics in response to questions and complaints they have posited some wished-for regulations which are presently non-existent: they have cited the current operation of the courts and existing laws as providing some protection especially with respect to points raised about segregation and the separation of church and state; but especially have they put a lot of stock into the things an EVA could and would do. In the main, it is the proposal of this new agency and the hope for what it could do that seems to provide answers to most of the objections and concerns which have been raised. Such an agency could regulate educational trade within its jurisdictional area but would not seem able to initiate or

develop needed programs as is the case with a local board of education. (Proponents have emphasized that an EVA in no way replaces a board of education and have said it would be too bad if an EVA did take on characteristics of a school board. They note that the local board of education would still be available to function in the capacity of initiating and developing needed programs. As we shall note later, the status and relationship to education of the board of education is modified considerably through the operation of a voucher plan. To date little or no attention seems to have been given as to who develops the education budget -- a regular function of the school board -- nor who determines and levies the local taxes for the district under a system where the public schools could claim and control only that portion of tax funds to which they were entitled because of voucher claims. Nor has any attention been given to the relationship of the EVA to budgeting and funding for the needs of all the pupils to be served by the array of participating schools within their jurisdiction.)

In its role as a regulating authority the EVA would have to assume responsibility for operational functions either directly or through arrangement.

The most significant point with respect to the effectiveness of any voucher system would be the vigor of parental choosing among alternatives based on accurate and adequate information and on their concern for effective education. One of the problems most readily expressed is that only certain parents are sufficiently informed and concerned to make the kinds of choices which would have an impact -- that most parents do not have an adequate basis of information nor of comparative judgement to make such choices. Proponents point out that more parents, with such voucher entitlement, would have the possibility of choice and that this would represent some incentive for greater participation. But one of the tasks generally laid out for the EVA is that of public information --

the establishment of some common format for presentation of information and rather wide dissemination of it to parents at a time when they would be most likely to make use of it. If done only on the basis of currently available information from participating schools and distributed or available only on the request of interested parents we would fall far short of the kinds of choices anticipated as making any significant impact on American education. It is agreed that this might only result in further disparity in the education of children of various socio-economic levels and interests with the upper middle class child being in a favored position. Hence there is need for an active role on the part of EVA in collecting and communicating such information.

This is a sizeable operation for an EVA. Surely some gain would be achieved by putting school descriptions in educational program terms instead of simply reporting organization. The description of schools in such terms is not unrelated to the current movement developing under the impact of program budgeting and the concept of accountability. It could well be that an equivalent amount of funding and effort on the part of the state level or on the part of some educational service region would direct the concern of parents not simply to which school but rather to what public decisions can and should be made within the present framework of the civil government of a school district. The latter proposition, of course, could not be tested in a voucher system experiment.

Apparently another function of the EVA would be to preside over the mating process of children and schools. It is obvious that choices would need to be made and confirmed well in advance of the school year. Whether this would be some annual event or whether once in, students might be permitted to stay in a participating school from year to year until they graduated or

chose to withdraw, would be a matter for determination. Also to be determined would be whether or not this process would be administered by the EVA as a central clearing house operation in communication with all parents and all participating schools or whether it would be a coordinating operation based on reports from the respective schools as they dealt with parents interested in enrolment of their pupils. In any event it would seem important to have some regular procedure to provide space for pupils who did not get into the school of their choice because it was oversubscribed and to see that a choice was made and an opportunity to attend school was provided for every child.

In the attempt to assure everyone equal chance at all participating schools it has been proposed that the undersubscribed schools must take all applicants and that some lottery system be established for fifty per cent of the enrolment in oversubscribed schools which would be set up in such a way as to give all applicants equal chance at admission and so that the ultimate enrolment would be a proportional representation of the various subgroups from which applications were submitted,as a protection of the civil rights of applicants. The lottery arrangement would seem to deny the usefulness of any judgment other than parental preference with respect to the fit between pupil and program. On the other hand, in the present situation of stress with respect to civil rights, it does seem a necessary condition. Thus a rather complex and difficult job of policing admissions, attendance, suspension and expulsion would seem to be the lot of the EVA.

In order to give children of the poor some kind of compensatory education in line with the principles of the Office of Economic Opportunity, it is proposed to provide an extra allowance on the vouchers of such children. Presumably if such a step up is provided and it is these children who are left in public schools there would be some compensation for loss of income from the

vouchers of children who chose other participating schools. The hope is expressed that they might do a better job with relatively the same amount of money and with fewer pupils. Or it is proposed that such a bonus-type payment might make the education of the children of the poor an attractive venture to some participating schools or at least that it would make such children more welcome in schools who found them enrolled as a result of the lottery system. Along with this special provision is another ground rule that seems desirable out of equity; the provision of free transportation to the school of choice for any child. Presumably the bonus amount for children of the poor could be determined and rather easily administered. How the free transportation arrangement is to be administered presents another problem for the EVA. The private arrangement of reimbursible transportation on the part of individual parents would be costly and wasteful. The pick-up of students by each participating school would also present some elements of wastefulness, better eliminated with an overall plan for the district. Would the EVA run a transportation system; would this kind of public service be an operational obligation of the public school system; or would a separate school transportation authority to plan such routing and operate such services be a necessity?

The foregoing items represent a considerable quota of responsibility for the unknown and non-existent EVA. To write down how it should work is fine as a model to show how it could work in most advantageous fashion -- although the specifics of such operation have not been well determined. Presumably such ground rules and the establishment of an EVA would be part of any agreement for a demonstration project which might be established for a pilot run. And the establishment of a demonstration project could carry with it the necessary financial and political support to carry it through. Such demonstration project would call for some dispensation beyond present legislation or for some temporary legislation covering the demonstration project as such.

The general pattern of operation of an EVA in wide adoption of voucher plans would have to be based on some presently non-existent legislation. How its functions are determined to test out a demonstration project may very well be specified by the experimenter and may be quite different from its evolution in common practice through the whole political process. We could be in for an array of special EVA districts much of the order of special charter school districts with a separate enactment for each EVA. Hopefully some general legislation would be developed. In any event it seems clear that if and when we arrive at such a stage of general legislative activity we would see in the political process all of the effective lobbying interests at work to bend the idealized ground rules to protect their own special interests or to gain an advantage. This hazard of the uncertain nature of the EVA is another matter to ponder in thinking of the general utility of any voucher system.

The EVA becomes one big question mark because so much depends upon it and because it has been proposed and described in terms of goals and idealized ground rules. Unanswered is any estimate of the added costs of an effective EVA, the description of organization and kind of staff required, the source of supporting funds. It may well be that the funding in such amounts and the additional staffing required, if added directly to the public schools as stimulus grants and helpful services to promote innovation, equal educational opportunity, and the consideration of schools in program terms would achieve as much or more than would be accomplished by going through the travail of moving to the new voucher system and depending upon an unknown undeveloped authority. Although some basis for presumption exists in the experience with Title I and Title III programs -- again such a proposition could not be examined in a voucher proposal experiment unless paired with an existing district to which equal funds and services were provided.

All of the foregoing discussion may seem rather naive and speculative. No wonder -- it is just that. It is probably unfair to the discussion and consideration of these same problems which the voucher proponents have advanced. But they grant room for disagreement about features of the proposals and have learned through long study to be patient with the over-reaction of each new voice expressing alarm. There will be present today some who can clear up much of the foregoing concern. Two other matters remain for attention -- and they may seem so interrelated as to be one basic concern. They are the changed position of the public school district and the changed position of the school district citizen-client. Some proponents cannot see these as any real matter of concern and feel that under the voucher system there is not enough difference or disadvantage to warrant pessimism. Certainly questions of this order would be difficult of determination in a demonstration project.

We are assured that public school districts will not be dismembered nor abolished -- that they have been too long a part of our American way to suffer such a fate -- that there is wide support and interest in them. In fact some response is that school districts will be much as they are now unless they happen to be in a location of highly competitive alternative programs and lose enrolment to the extent that they are forced to reorganize and rennovate or go out of business. If, in fact, little change is to be expected then it would hardly seem worth going to all the trouble and expense of establishing and operating a voucher system. Except for the public schools all other voucher system participants may choose to operate or not. Even though public schools are assumed to be equal competitors with the private schools this cannot be so.

Personally I would expect strong support to remain with the public schools but it is possible that they could end up being the place attended by those whose parents want no particular choice. They would thus lose to other schools the stimulation of those who do want a choice and who have been active in the

past in parent associations and in citizen advisory committees. Proponents might suggest that when public schools have responded actively to such parental interest they need not fear loss of such parents. The public schools might also -- or actually will -- be the place where those go who cannot get in elsewhere and who are dissident because the free choice of the voucher system was unrealized by them.

Given the problem of funding which was noted earlier, the public schools will be at a disadvantage inasmuch as competing systems will likely be working on the voucher amount plus added support from endowment or gifts. The ground rules provide only that the voucher shall be accepted in full payment of tuition but do not preclude the acceptance of grants and gifts for such schools.

The public schools may find themselves no longer setting the overall program of education for a community -- a program supplemented or modified as some parents on their own means choose the non-public school. They may rather become the school which accommodates to what is left over since, of necessity, the public schools will have the obligation of providing schooling. (Such a prospect might well promote more vigorous citizen concern and support.)

I should have indicated earlier that the exact wording of the title for this group session was not of my choosing. My concern is not whether or not the customer will get you whether or not you watch out. It is rather that under the voucher proposals he would become primarily customer rather than citizen client. My concern is the symbolic abandonment of his identification as one of the educational decision-makers through a unit of civil government -- the public school district. There is no question but that his legal status would remain the same with respect to the district -- it is the shift in his psychology

To many this will represent little practical change operationally. It does represent considerable change with respect to the key role of school districts and their way of operating. Although all citizens -- those with children in the public schools, those with children in other schools, and those without any children of school age or any children at all -- are ideally the body politic making educational decisions by direct vote or through the actions of their representative school board, the parent group has always been the main group with current interest in program and in development of the school. When the parent shifts psychologically to shopper and finds the citizen role of less importance than formerly we may well have a board of education and professional staff heading a unit of civil government in which they have lost the array of concerned citizens. Such a board would find itself alone in competing with other voucher eligible schools and at the disadvantages noted. One does not intend to malign the citizenry by suggesting that this would happen without question but the change in operation surely makes it a strong possibility.

Parents individually as well as in groups can be expected to seek the best buy in terms of what they see as the needs of their own children right now and trust that some one else will look after long range concerns and broad societal educational policy. Maybe the market will function to do it -- and if it would then there would be no need for the ground rules and the regulations proposed for an Educational Voucher Authority. That very proposal for regulation bespeaks concern that many matters of public interest and well being would go awry if there were not a new layer of authority watching over the plan.

Frequently people will describe the basis for their school practices as doing what is best for the children. This, of course, is an essential hope

for the voucher system -- that it will do best, as seen by specific parents for their respective children. Public schools are not just for the children -- they serve the children in the interests of society. The participatory process embodied in the idea of public control of education through school boards and the exercise of state responsibility represents the social process through which any and all can have their say about what each wishes society to become. What is best for the children in this sense may really be our way of saying what is best for society -- especially if we keep it in terms of what is best for all children.

Ideally public schools serve all children except as they are unable to do so through lack of facilities or program or expertise. Ideally they seek the additional resources and program to meet the need of all children. Over the years the program has developed to include those at the various extremes and always also in the best interests of society. No other social unit is so all inclusive in intent and purpose. The idea of a public school system is that any and every child of school age within district boundaries is known and received and served as an individual worthy of attention and investment. The key value in our democratic society is the dignity and worth of each human individual. Through the operation of the school district as a unit of civil government all citizens have the right and obligation to take part through elections and through elected representatives.

The value basis for decisions with respect to public education is of the highest order. They deal with respect for each and every human being and with the social consequences of such decisions. They reach beyond the life time of the deciders, beyond the geographic boundaries of the district, and above the criteria of convenience or pleasure or profit. In this social process in addition to what schools do for children is the important role of

providing experience and development of citizens in public decision making! A kind of experience on a value level much needed in respect to the other areas of public decision making in which we participate.

Under our present arrangement there is direct obligation on the citizens to be involved and concerned about sound education for all children and for the good of the whole society, there is responsibility for finding adequate funding to provide the quality of comprehensive services which are needed, there is responsibility for making bureaucracy work.

We can find ways to adequate funding through shifts in public priorities and through ever working at more effective use of the educational dollar. We must continue to find new routes for participation in public educational governance. Some of these are being particularly explored in urban situations. In systems of adequate size we can also find ways of expanding viable alternatives for learners so that there is choice of materials and methods and goals and so that the system has enough different things going on within it that its own vitality is maintained.